

INTRODUCTION

Every year, around Thanksgiving time, I bring a State of the Church message to our church family. I want us look to see where we've been, where we are, and where we should be going. This message allows us to give God thanks for the great things He has done. It also allows me to share a part of the vision God has given me for our church.

Do you know how old Green Acres is? This local church as been in existence since 1955, but we're a lot older than that. There's a sign in front of a little church on US Highway 231 just north of Troy, Alabama. The sign, which is almost as big as the church building, says, "PINE LEVEL CHURCH OF CHRIST - FOUNDED 33 A.D." I like that sign. In a real sense, we could say Green Acres was founded in 33 A.D. Jesus went up, the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost, the Christians went out, and the Church was built up. It all started with just 120 people praying, and on the first day, the church grew by 3,000 - a few days later God added another 5,000. Soon there were over 10,000 members of the church in Jerusalem. Since that day, God has been expanding His Church by setting up thousands of local franchises. 95% of the churches on the planet are small outlets, but God is also setting up a few Super-Center Churches whose size resembles that of the first church in Jerusalem. In His Sovereignty, God has placed a large, full-service franchise right here in Tyler - Green Acres. So first, let's pause and:

I. THANK GOD FOR HIS FAVOR!

God continues to bless us with growth. Our goal is to be *healthy* church - and healthy organisms grow. There is so much about our church you can't measure with a number; you can't measure the passion people have in their hearts for God or the depth of the prayer life of our congregation or the warmth of the love that exists here. But there are some things you can measure, so let's look at 12 numerical indicators of what God is doing:

1. TOTAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: 11,101 (ten years ago: 7,702)

Having your name on the roll of a church is not the same as having your name written down in the Book of Life in heaven! These are people who have indicated a desire to be affiliated with Green Acres. I've said before, a membership roll is basically a prayer list.

2. NEW MEMBERS: 943

We love to welcome new members! We aren't some exclusive club whose motto is "members only." We're aren't a showcase for saints, we're a hospital for sinners.

3. BAPTISMS: 331

Prior to this past year, we had never baptized 300 people in a single year, so this is an all-time high. I love when people who are already Christians transfer their membership into our congregation, and I love to see several thousand people gathering to study God's Word. But What really lights my fire is when people to come to know Jesus! Jesus said, "There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (Luke 15:7)

4. BIBLE STUDY ATTENDANCE: 2,941

Our space for Sunday School has been limited because of our construction and the renovation of the children's building. We want *every* member of our church involved in a small group Bible Study. We're doing two things to expand our Sunday School. First, we're looking for a Minister of Adult Education and Outreach. In addition, we're adding a full Sunday School structure at 11:00 am. So you can attend Bible Study at 8:15 or 9:30 or 11:00.

5. WORSHIP ATTENDANCE: 4,096 (ten years ago: 2,795)

There are only a handful of churches in America that have over 3,000 people attending worship. All of the other large churches are located in metropolitan areas. We are unique because we are a large church in a medium sized city

6. TOTAL OFFERINGS \$ 12.2 million (ten years ago: \$4 million)

This includes money given to the church budget, Share the Joy, and other designated offerings. Out of our 11,000 members, 3,927 different people contributed to God's work through Green Acres. That includes every child, teenager, and adult who used an offering envelope, or wrote a check. The average offering last year was \$257 per month. Averages can be misleading if you have lots of small gifts - and we receive more one dollar bills than any other place in town! When you break it down further, 1715 people gave \$100 or more a month. And only 900 people gave 80% of the entire amount.

7. NEEDED TO FINISH RENOVATION PROJECT: \$2.6 million

God blessed us by allowing us to pay for this new facility, but at Green Acres we have a program called FOREVER WE BUILD. The renovation project we're in now will be completed in January but we are depending on the continued gifts to Share the Joy with the Children to pay for this project.

8. TEXAS BAPTIST WORK: \$724,000

Through the Cooperative Program, last year our church donated almost three-quarters of a million dollars to support Texas Baptist work. About half of that amount went to support the institutions of the BGCT including Baylor University, Hardin Simmons, Howard Payne, ETBU and the other Texas Baptist Schools.

9. SOUTHERN BAPTIST WORK: \$357,000

Also through the Cooperative Program, we donated \$357,000 to support the work of Southern Baptists here and around the world. About half of that amount went directly to the International Mission Board.

10. GABC MISSION PROJECTS: \$267,000

We budgeted this amount last year to fund the direct mission projects our church is involved in. This includes Good Sam, our local missions, national and international mission projects.

11. WORLD MISSION OFFERING \$ 293,000

Last year during the Christmas season, you gave almost \$300,000 to support mission work locally, nationally, and around the world!

12. MISSION VOLUNTEERS: 1,796 people in 123 different projects

According to our Missions Minister, Tom Robuck, we had more people involved in short term mission projects last year than in any previous year in the history of our church.

For us, it's more than a song—God is good all the time! As we reflect on the great things God has done this past year, we should follow Jeremiah 9:23-24: This is what the Lord says: "Let not the wise boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in those I delight," declares the Lord. We aren't boasting in what *we've* done, but we are celebrating what God has done! Not only must we thank God for His favor, we must look ahead and

II. TRUST GOD FOR THE FUTURE!

Have you noticed the new sign on the corner of Ridge and Dulse? You'll see the bell tower from the first Green Acres building in 1955. Beside it you'll find the words from Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you, plans to give you a hope and a future." It's important we never lose sight of the wonderful spiritual heritage of Green Acres. But Jesus said once we have put our hand to the plow, we must keep our eyes focused on the challenges that lay ahead.

The world is changing around us and the church must be willing to change the way we communicate the message of Jesus to a 21st Century audience. Resistance to change in the church is one of the biggest hindrances to reaching any generation with the gospel. When some people sing, "Gimme' that old time religion" they are thinking of the 1950s! They think the Gaither music of the 70's is too modern! May I say to you, "Welcome to the 21st Century?"

Resistance to change isn't new. Here's a letter written in January 31, 1829 To President Andrew Jackson:

The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as "railroads." The federal government MUST preserve the canals for the following two reasons: (1) If canal boats are supplanted by railroads serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, hostlers, repairmen and lock tenders will be left without means of livelihood. (2) Canals are absolutely essential for the defense of the United States. In the event of war, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move the supplies so vital to waging modern war. As you may know, Mr. President, railroad carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of fifteen miles per hour by "engines" which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the country side, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening woman and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed. Signed Martin Van Buren, Governor of New York (1837, elected President.)

Many churches have the same attitude: If it's new, it can't be good! Most churches are trying to reach people using the old canal method, when they could be using the railroad method or the jet method or even the space shuttle method!

For the first 1500 years of the church, there were only a few hand-copied Bibles; and only a tiny percentage of the people could read anyway. During that time God used the oral communication of the gospel - people telling other people - and it worked! In addition, God used the artwork in the stained glass windows of the cathedrals to teach people. Illiterate people would stare in wonder at the pictures in stained glass windows depicting Bible stories. That's how they learned the Bible stories.

When Gutenberg invented the printing press around 1500, the method of communicating the gospel changed radically. The first book he printed was a Bible - it wasn't cheap however - it took three years of an average salary to buy one Gutenberg Bible. That reminds me of the funny story about a man talking to his pastor. He said he had been looking through some old steamer trunks from his great-grandfather who had immigrated from Germany years earlier. He mentioned he found an old German Bible with the name Gutenberg or Gutenstein on it - it was so old he threw it away. The shocked pastor said, "That might have been a Gutenberg Bible worth millions of dollars!" The man said, "No, it wasn't worth much because some guy named Luther had written all in it!"

When Bibles became available, people began to read them. Some of them realized the church had departed from the scriptures, which produced Protestant Reformation. For the next 400 years, print was the main medium to communicate the gospel.

In the past 100 years we've seen more scientific advances than in the previous 1900 years combined! 100 years ago, man couldn't fly - the Wright Brothers made their first flight in December of 1903. Less than a hundred years later, we've put a man on the moon and the space shuttle isn't even front page news. Some churches are stuck in the stained glass window mode, or the printing press mode while we are living in the digital age that is moving toward a paperless society. If Jesus tarries, the time will come when a preacher will stand before you with his handheld PDA and he'll shoot you an IR beam that contains the sermon outline. Your PDA will also contain the entire text of the Bible - including four or five translations.

The church must be willing to change the way we get the message out or we will soon become as out of place as a covered wagon on Loop 323. The message is the same as it was 2,000 years ago - Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. But we must be willing to change the methods we use to share the message. Here are four 21st century challenges I place before you. We must:

1. Explore new ways to introduce normal people to Jesus

What do we call people out there who don't have a personal relationship with Jesus? Lost? They don't believe they're lost because they know where they are. Unbelievers? Everyone believes something - and besides you can believe in God and still go to hell. Pagan doesn't work, and the Muslims have cornered the word infidel. Unchurched? That's misleading because many people who don't know Jesus show up at church sometimes. Leonard Sweet has helped me find a great

label for those people out there - They are *normal*. The Christian life is *not* normal. Jesus said that we are to turn the other cheek and bless those who curse us - that's not normal. When someone makes us carry their load a mile - we go the second mile - that's not normal. Even the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 2:14: The Bible says, "The natural man doesn't receive the things of God because they are foolishness to him."

They're normal – We're the NUTS! That stands for Never Underestimate The Spirit. Welcome to the NUT house! We're mixed nuts because we have different kinds of people. My job as the head nut is to drive you even more NUTS!

As NUTS, we must decide whether we exist to simply gather here at the NUT house each week and have a good time, or if we exist to focus on bringing those normal people to Jesus. In the Great Commission Jesus commanded us to go out and help normal people become NUTS.

It's all a matter of priority. Three guys were deer hunting, and Leroy saw Bob dragging a beautiful ten point buck into camp. Leroy said, "Where's Joe? I thought he was with you." Bob said, "When Joe shot this deer he was so excited that he had a heart attack and died on the spot." Leroy said, "and you mean to tell me you left Joe and drug that deer all the way back?" Bob said, "Yep. I didn't figure anyone would come along and steal Joe." It's all a matter of priority. Our priority must be on sharing the good news with normal people. You NUTS are safe - the thief can't steal your salvation. We need to focus on those who are going to hell if they die.

I want you to meet some of those normal people. In preparation for this message, we sent a film crew out on a Sunday morning to interview normal people. We asked them what they think about church and Jesus.

I know this sounds radical, but I think every adult Sunday School class ought to plan one Sunday to meet somewhere off campus during Sunday School time. Instead of showing up at the NUT house - meet somewhere to just observe the normal people. For instance, show up at Wal-Mart, Brookshires, Lowe's or any other store at 9:30 on a Sunday morning, just to see who's there and start thinking about HOW we can share the MESSAGE with those people.

Let me give you one example to get you thinking in the right direction. Christian recreation is a great way to introduce normal people to God. We have fifty acres of land at our South Campus and Buddy Holland our Recreation Committee have a marvelous plan being developed to build soccer fields, softball fields, a lake, walking trails, and other neat things like a awesome skateboard park. We aren't building it just for us NUTS to use, we want to use that place as a tool to invite people from all over East Texas to be exposed to the kindness and love of God. Right now, we don't need another church building out on 69S - it's becoming church row. But I can see hundreds of families out there watching their kids play soccer and our folks meeting them and sharing the good news with them. It's going to take money, of course, but I think it's a great investment in reaching people.

In 1955, about 300 brave souls moved out to the very southern edge of Tyler and started a church where there were mostly just... Green Acres - they must have been NUTS - yep. They anticipated the growth -and now we're in the middle of Tyler. We will never need to totally relocate out to

the South campus, but we must continue to develop that property because anyone can see that's the direction our city is moving. We can't wait until it happens - we must develop it to anticipate the population growth. Yeah, I admit I'm NUTS - but I try to Never Underestimate The Spirit.

I want to lay a second challenge before you as a new way to reach normal people. We must:

2. Enlarge our television audience

One of the greatest outreach tools we've ever had is our regional television broadcast. The vast majority of people who have watched our service on Sunday mornings are never going to come to our church - and that's okay. The reason we provide it is to share God's Word with people. We now have a tremendous opportunity to enlarge our audience throughout America. We've been on one station (INSP) nationally for the past year - and we've gotten thousands of responses each week through our web site. We are at a critical point where we must decide to either expand this national ministry or to drop it. Studies have shown when a high quality ministry program is seen on a variety of channels and at different times, it reaches a critical mass of people who are already Christians and they will financially support such a ministry. At the same time, God's Word is multiplied and can be heard by more people without Christ.

Christian television is at a transitional point right now. A generation of great mainstream Bible teachers like Charles Stanely, James Kennedy, Robert Schueller, Adrian Rogers and Chuck Swindoll are nearing retirement. Within the next three to five years there is going to be a shortage of quality mainstream Bible teaching ministries on television. I love my charismatic brothers and sisters, and I'll never criticize any ministry that preaches Jesus. But if someone doesn't step in and provide a quality mainstream Christian message to fill this gap, Americans will think the only kind of Christian is a charismatic believer.

We have the finest technology of any church in America - we were the first church in America to install all digital equipment. You've seen the great work of Tibby Wright and Richie Huval - so we know the quality will be first class. I can't stand up here and blow my own horn, but I've been told my many of you God has gifted me to teach the Bible. So, if you think our church has a message America needs to hear, we need your support to enlarge this ministry. It will not be easy or cheap. We've spent about \$100,000 this past year, and we'll need about \$400,000 this next year if we are going to enlarge our audience to reach that critical mass. My personal vision statement is to get as much of the Word as I can to as much of the world as I can. I think we must start thinking of the television ministry as one of the most effective missionary tools we have. Without ever leaving Tyler, we can carry God's Word into millions of homes across America.

3. Establish a new church in an American city

One of the greatest mission fields in the world exists in the major cities of America. Tyler is the buckle of the Bible belt, and over 60% of East Texans attend church on a fairly regular basis. It's not like that in other areas of our nation. For instance, in Seattle, Washington there are 3.2 Million people - and only about 6% of those are Christian. Our church has the resources and the vision to go into Seattle and plant a new congregation. We could hire a sharp young pastor and send him and his family to live in a city like Seattle. We could send many of you up for short

term visits to help them start a church. You say, "We've never done anything like this before." I know it sounds NUTS - but that's why I like it!

4. Expand our Asian partnership

Maybe some people think we're NUTS to impact a city of a million people in Asia - but we're doing it. We have established a legitimate city partnership between Tyler and this Asian city. Mayor Joey Seeber and the Tyler City Council have been kind enough to endorse this partnership. We are completing the first year of a three year arrangement. I'm happy to report when we started the partnership, there were very few Believers in the city. Today, some of the most influential leaders of the city are followers of Jesus Christ - and by the time this three year partnership is concluded, I'm convinced thousands of the residents of this city are going to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Last spring, a group of business owners and leaders from Tyler visited the city. This past summer, we took a basketball team and English teachers into the city. Over 6,000 people packed out the coliseum for three straight nights. There was a huge banner the city had placed in the coliseum that said, "WELCOME FRIENDS FROM TYLER! FRIENDSHIP FIRST - COMPETITION SECOND." Six students and a professor from the college in Asia spent four weeks in Tyler last summer studying at TJC - and staying in your homes.

I'll be leaving at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning with twenty other folks from our church. Most of the team members are in the medical field and they'll be meeting, learning, and consulting with the medical professionals there. Trinity Mother Frances Health Care System has been kind enough to partner with us to invite four of their physicians to visit Tyler next spring. I'll be asking you to volunteer to open your home to keep some of these Asian doctors for a week.

Mayor Seeber has invited an official delegation from our partner city to visit Tyler next spring during the Azalea Festival -and we are hopeful they will visit Tyler. In addition, we hope to take some of our community leaders to visit over there in May. For next July, Kevin Burdette is putting together a team of college kids to sing and a band. Some Apache Belles from TJC will be going as well.

The college over there has asked us to send them English teachers. If you would be willing to devote a year to teach English in the college over there, they will provide an apartment on campus, and will pay you a good salary. Plus they will smother you with kindness, affection, and hospitality. Will you pray and ask God if He is wanting to use you in this way?

CONCLUSION

Apollo 11 and 12 were flawless missions to the moon. Apollo 13 blasted off on April 11, 1970 with little public interest. When it entered orbit an oxygen tank ruptured, severely damaging the space craft. Commander James Lovell uttered five famous words with an icy calmness: "Houston...We've got a problem." The crew had to move into the Lunar Lander to survive. Even though the mission to the moon was scrubbed, Apollo 13 couldn't just return home. It had to circle around the moon to allow the gravitational forces to slingshot it back toward our planet.

The men and women on the ground at the Johnson Space Flight Center worked tirelessly around the clock to rescue Apollo 13. There was a tiny window of reentry in earth's atmosphere. If they came in too steep they would burn up. If the trajectory was too shallow, they would bounce off the atmosphere and careen into space. Following the directions of their friends in Houston, the crew fired their retro-rockets as they were instructed - and they made it safely home.

We live in a world where thousands of people need to admit. "God...I've got a problem." It may be a drug problem, a marriage problem, or a lust problem - all normal people have problems - NUTS, too. As the church we are like the workers at NASA. It's our job to lovingly guide these people home. If we don't, they may burn up, or their lives may careen off into nothingness. We exist as a church to love those people with problems and to guide them safely home.

OUTLINE

I. THANK GOD FOR HIS FAVOR!

1. Total church membership: 11,101 (ten years ago: 7,702)
2. New members: 943
3. Baptisms: 331
4. Bible study attendance: 2,941
5. Worship attendance: 4,096 (ten years ago: 2,795)
6. Total offerings: \$12.2 million (ten years ago: \$4 million)
7. Needed to finish renovation project: \$2.6 million
8. Texas Baptist work: \$724,000
9. Southern Baptist work: \$357,000
10. GABC Mission projects: \$267,000
11. World Mission Offering: \$293,000
12. Mission volunteers: 1,796 people in 123 different projects

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II. TRUST GOD FOR THE FUTURE!

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you, plans to give you a hope and a future." *Jeremiah 29:11*

1. Explore new ways to introduce normal people to Jesus
We're the NUTS! (Never Underestimate The Spirit)
2. Enlarge our television audience
3. Establish a new church in an American city
4. Expand our Asian partnership



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If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes